

"The Church Matters"
A Sermon by John Buchanan,
Moderator of General Assembly
Preached May 19, 1997 at 71st Presbytery of Arkansas, Jonesboro

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Startle us, oh God, with your word and open our hearts and our minds to your spirit. That hearing your word we might also believe, and believing, we might be willing to trust you with our lives. Through Jesus Christ, Our Lord. Amen.

Our lesson this evening is from St. Paul's First Letter to the early Christian Church in Corinth, reading from the introduction to that letter.

Listen for God's word.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apolos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The word of the Lord.

[response from congregation]

Don't you just love those Corinthians? There weren't very many of them, maybe fifty, seventy-five. Perched in one of the most cosmopolitan seaport cities in the Roman Empire, a trade crossroads ^{with} merchants, tradespeople coming and going. There was a thriving marketplace in downtown Corinth. ~~There was~~ a theatre, a synagogue, a temple to Aphrodite outside town that employed one thousand working sacred prostitutes. This was an interesting city. Here they were, perched in that precarious situation where the city virtually ignored them and when it paid any attention to them at all, as Paul indicates in the introduction to the letter, concluded that their ideas were foolishness. There they were and instead of sitting down together and doing a little strategic planning about how to survive in Corinth, instead of putting a mission plan in place about how to say a good word about Jesus Christ that had a chance of getting heard in that interesting cosmopolitan city, the Corinthian Christians decided instead to choose up sides and have a fight. How like a church.

And Paul, Paul was worried that that fight was so public and so vehement that the little church would whirl apart. It was, in fact, a public scandal. "Is Christ divided?" he asked them, I think testily.

They took their theology seriously. It was a serious theological dispute. Some said, "We belong to Apollos." Apollos was apparently a professor from Alexandria who had stopped in at Corinth and had his version of the Christian gospel and he collected some supporters and they believed this was the way. "We're the Apollos' party." And others said, "Well, we belong to Paul." Paul would have been the liberal. Paul would allow anybody in the church,

even the Gentiles. And others said, "Well, we belong to Peter." Peter was the Torah Christian. The one who began with the rule book, the Book of Order. And, others said, "Well, you all may belong [notice the way after a year I've learned how to say y'all?]."

[laughter from congregation]

...you all might belong to Paul or Apollos or Cephas, but we belong to Jesus. We, we have the real thing." And to them all Paul writes, Is Christ divided? Be of one mind. Be in agreement.

Two years ago at Wichita, at the event in which I first met Kathy Ulrich, we talked about ~~for~~ ~

~~imagining~~, and at the end of that assembly the Presbyterian Church said, "Theology matters."

And it does matter. Last year we elected a Moderator who reminded the church that mission matters and mission does matter. And I'm suggesting this year that the church matters. And that in these precarious and interesting times in which God has called us to the Presbyterian Church, USA, it's about time to say that loudly and clearly because if we don't say it loudly and clearly and hold onto one another we may, in fact, find ourselves as divided, embarrassingly so as that group in Corinth.

These are interesting days, are they not, for the Presbyterian Church? We're a big church.

We have 2.7 million members.

And while that's not as many as we wish we had, that's still a lot of Presbyterians. We have 11,400 congregations all over this country, serving God with distinction, serving the Kingdom of Jesus Christ with commitment to justice and peace and love and compassion. We have 68 colleges and universities that are still related to our General Assembly. We have mission work in 87 different countries. And when we pull our funds and do our program together, we spend \$116 million per year, so we're a big operation. And we're an old church.

It's one of the joys of the Moderator of the General Assembly to be invited to preach at church anniversaries. I've preached at a few 100s and a few 150s and a couple of 25s and 50s, but I've also preached at a few 200th anniversaries and a 250th and a 275th. And before it's over I'll be in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, preaching at the 300th anniversary of the Lawrenceville Church just down the road from Princeton. We have churches on the shores of the bay down ~~there~~ ^{here} that are more than 320 years old. We were here before the nation. Our predecessors, those crusty, stubborn Calvinists from Scotland and Northern Ireland brought with them a deep-seated suspicion of hierarchies and monarchies and authority and so they brought with them the philosophic seedbed of the American Revolution. So much so that William Pitt, on the floor of Parliament, called the skirmish in the Colonies that "Presbyterian revolt."

And when independence was won, those sons and daughters of John Calvin dove deeply into the life of the nation and helped to write what historian Martin Marty calls the singular, most public, Calvinist document ever produced - the Constitution of the United States of America, with its suspicion of one another, with its realistic view of humankind, with its checks and balances and its continuing insistence on the dignity of the individual.

We're a big church and we're an old church and we are a distinguished missionary church. I've spent my life pretty much in and around cities and I've been concerned mostly about urban ministry. And so it's been a wonderful experience this year for me to have seen the global worldwide ministries of this Presbyterian Church of ours and to learn a lot of things I didn't know before. Namely, that we Presbyterians are the premier missionary church in the United States, that our missionaries were ^{often} there first, ~~we were there first and with more resources than any other American denomination.~~ So ~~much~~ ^{much} so that all around the world now there are Christian communities flourishing because of Presbyterian missionary ^{activity}. We are still related to ~~the~~ partner projects in 87 ~~different~~ countries. We still have more than 400 full-time mission personnel in the field and probably another 500 or 600 volunteers coming and going. It's an impressive operation.

Much of that early mission work has borne amazing fruit. I was privileged to bring your greetings to the Presbyterian Reform ^{ed} Church in Cuba which finds itself suddenly free, since 1990, free to operate out in the open and suddenly its sanctuaries are full, and it doesn't have enough ministers. ^{The Presbyterian Seminary} ~~Its seminary at~~ Matanzas is crowded with bright, energetic, committed young Cuban ~~Christians~~ ^{students}.

I was privileged to ^{be in} ~~go on down to~~ Brazil and see one of the fastest growing Presbyterian Churches in the world, collaborating in Brazil, interestingly enough, in theological education with the Pentecostals. What an interesting combination - a Reformed theological seminary helping the Pentecostals, the Pentecostals helping us.

And then to Central Europe, to bring your greetings to the Waldensians in Rome and to the Vatican, which is, indeed, interested in what's happening in this church of ours in the United States. Then to Croatia to bring greetings to Presbyterian partners in that tortured part of the world.

We were visitors in Osijek, a large city, 100,000 people, where 800,000 mortar shells fell in a very short period of time, and where 1,000 people were killed. Not combatants - we're talking about children and women and people just doing their grocery shopping and hanging up the wash. Then on to Vinkovsci, a small town where the Bishop of the Reformed Church of Croatia and his wife live. He's the pastor of the Reformed Church in Vinkovsci.

one of the places
Vinkovsci is where a ~~little bit~~ of ethnic cleansing took place. You've heard the horror stories of one race simply killing other people because they're Muslims or because they're Catholics. But ethnic cleansing also does something very devious. One side targets the heart of the culture of the other side. The Serbians targeted the hospitals and the town hall and the schools and the symphony hall, and the churches, and ~~there~~ they ~~all~~ were in ruins. The Serbians bombed the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Vinkovsci, and so the Roman Catholics went down the street and blew up the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral, ~~and~~ *Our* little Reformed Church took a direct hit. Because of our partnership and our generosity, a grant was made to repair ~~that~~ *the* building and since the ~~date the peace accords~~ *Dayton Accords* were signed, the people are back, and Bishop Langh and his wife are back and the building is patched up and the organ plays again. I was invited because I'm Moderator of the Church that made all this happen, to receive the thanks, the gratitude of this modest little church on the Sunday after Easter. I was there to preach and to preside at Communion. What an experience to preach about the resurrection of Jesus

Christ, about what that means historically and what that means in terms of existential hope in a city that was ~~flattened a couple of years ago~~ ^{devastated} and ~~now~~ where new life is beginning to happen. What an experience to break the bread and serve the cup to a congregation of about 120 Croatian Presbyterians crowded in this little church, shoulder-to-shoulder. Croatians stand for the entire ceremony of Communion and the pastor gives the bread to each person. ~~And~~ I saw the tears on the cheeks of the Croatians, not only in gratitude to us, but, I think, gratitude for the larger fellowship of the church of which we are all a part.

Just three weeks ago today we were in Korea bringing greetings again to interesting and vital and important mission partners. There are a lot of Presbyterian Churches in Korea. There are big churches, 20,000, 30,000, 40,000 members. We called on our partners in Hannam University and Yong Sei University, and to ~~girls schools~~ ^{A Girls School} and saw Presbyterian Christianity as vigorously and vitally alive as any place in the world. We also visited the 38th Parallel. I'm old enough to remember the events that happened in the Peninsula of Korea in the early 1950s and saw that harsh barbed wire demilitarized zone on the other side of which one of the finest and largest and most aggressive armed forces in the world, the North Korean Army, is perched waiting for the order to invade. Seoul, by the way, is just a 35 minute drive from the 38th Parallel, so we're talking about the immediacy of danger. Let me tell you that among the hopeful signs, and there aren't many, but among the hopeful signs in the Korean Peninsula is that on the north side of that harsh border, the 38th Parallel, in North Korea, the most closed society in the world, a continuing Stalinist society, there are still 500 Presbyterian Churches. All but two no longer have buildings. There are two operating in buildings, but there are 500 congregations meeting in homes, meeting secretly, waiting for the day of reunification. If there is hope, it's there. And let me tell you just one little vignette that touched my heart very

deeply. We have a fine Presbyterian executive who is in charge of our work in Korea. Insik Kim is the secretary for that part of Asia and he is, in fact, a North Korean, and because of our long and faithful witness we have the respect of the North Korean government, as much respect as they're going to give any organization affiliated with religion. Insik is permitted to get into North Korea and can bring back first-hand reports and while there he told this touching story. There is ~~an artist~~ a very distinguished Korean artist by the name of Kim as well, who is now in his late seventies. He left North Korea, left his wife and small child in 1950, because he was openly a Christian and would have been executed, so he went to the south and he has not seen his family since 1950. Ten million Korean families, by the way, share that experience. It would be as if this country were simply divided in half and we had not seen anybody on the other side of the divide for half a century. That's what it is to live in Korea. Mr. Kim has not seen his wife or son since 1950. Somehow, our Insik and Mr. Kim, the artist, got together.

Mr. Kim, the artist, told Insik his story and said, if you're ever there in the village where I'm from and should happen to remember, would you see if my wife is alive? Would you just go find out and bring me news back? Well, Insik did that. He found Mr. Kim's wife and said, your husband is a distinguished artist in the south. She said, I know, I've heard that. She said, tell him I love him. Tell him I think about him every day. And come back before you go back to South Korea. So Insik came back and she gave him a jar of honey and said take this honey to my husband and tell him I love him and think about him. So Insik did it, took the jar to her husband who could not believe the good news and in tears accepted the honey. Insik called on this gentlemen a year later and the little jar of honey was still there. I eat it because I know she thinks of me everyday, he said. I eat a bite every day and I've made it

last for a year. That kind of faithfulness, that kind of love transcends politics, transcends military violence and because it is connected to the church and the cause of Jesus Christ I think there is reason in the midst of that dark situation for a prospect for hopefulness.

This is a distinguished missionary church. Do you know that there are more Presbyterians in Kenya than there are in the United States? Do you know that the fastest growing Presbyterian Reformed Church in the world is in the Sudan where suffering is off the charts, but the gospel of Christ is welcomed and churches are growing?

Well, once a year we Presbyterians have a national meeting called a General Assembly, part religious parliament and part family reunion. I don't know about you, but my family gets together for a reunion once a year and I go to it, oh, maybe once every five years and it doesn't take long at a family reunion, I've discovered, to realize why we only do this once a year.

[laughter from congregation]

As soon as you get together with your family you realize that this is a diverse group. We don't have a whole lot in common except our genes.

Well, the Presbyterian Church gets together once a year and because all those commissioners are Calvinists, because they've felt the personal call of God to have an opinion about everything...

[laughter from congregation]

... and because they are seriously convinced that we are not closeted, cloistered Christians and that our faith exists in the marketplace. So the General Assembly can be an interesting event. I was delighted to read something that old Charles Finney wrote in the last century, 1835. Finney was a great revivalist and he was apparently worrying about the Presbyterian Church because he wrote in a book on revivals and religion in 1835 the following: "These things in the Presbyterian Church, their contentions and janglings are so outrageous, so wicked, so ridiculous, that there must be a jubilee in Hell every year about the time of the meeting of the General Assembly."

[laughter from congregation]

Well, I don't know about a "jubilee in Hell" but because we are worldly Christians, we do reflect sometimes all together too accurately what's going on in the world. And I propose tonight that we are currently reflecting, too accurately, something the sociologists call a cultural war. Cultural war is when ideology overtakes us. Cultural war is when the civil exchange of opinions becomes the verbal equivalent of hand-to-hand combat. It's a situation in which you can't compromise any more because you might betray your truths. It's where the moderate middle all of a sudden sounds like a waffling place. There's an awful lot of that going on right now in the Presbyterian Church. The Assembly did manage to stay together this last year. We, as you know, decided to send to the Presbyteries a proposal to amend the Constitution and the Presbyteries have now voted on that amendment and it has passed. When I was moderating through those intense discussions, I knew that there would come a time along

about March, 1997, when a Presbytery would cast its ballots and this issue would be adjudicated one way or the other. We really didn't know which way it would go. Smart money was betting that Amendment B would lose.

Originally everybody thought it would lose, but it won. I knew then that at some point in the spring there was going to be a sizeable portion of the Presbyterian family deeply, deeply disappointed, perhaps very angry. Before I knew how it would come out I was saying, in every speech I could make, that I hoped we could find a way to somehow affirm the diversity which exists in this beautiful church of ours, to hold onto one another and to respect the fact that we do not agree on this issue, that we are as deeply divided in terms of the actual percentage of Commissioners who voted on this issue as you can get. The vote is about 51 to 49 percent in terms of the Commissioner vote. So I'm calling on our whole family now, in these critical days, to extend what Cliff Kirkpatrick, our new Stated Clerk ² calls an extra measure of grace. We've been promised by advocates of Amendment B that there will be no witch hunt and I hope that's a good promise and I'm calling also on the other side, the people who are vehemently opposed to Amendment B, to not walk away from this, to not declare absolute independence, but for all of us, for Christ' sake, literally, to take a big, deep breath and to stand down and to step back and take the measure of what we've done. After the vote there was a, I thought, a pure Presbyterian moment. The Moderator had met with people on both sides of the issue and had decided that whoever won or whoever lost this vote would have an opportunity to express themselves to the Assembly so when the vote was taken and Amendment B was passed, the gay-lesbian organizations were granted ten minutes on the docket to do with it what they wished. They could speak, but they decided instead to simply, quietly, with great dignity, to walk into the Assembly singing a South African anthem, *Walking*

in the Light of God. And so in they came and there were 900 people before it was all over. Gay Presbyterians, lesbian Presbyterians. But probably the majority were their parents and their brothers and sisters and their heterosexual friends and their general supporters and they walked in very quietly and some were wearing white stoles, memorializing Presbyterian gay-lesbian persons who had died of AIDS. A remarkable thing began to happen. The Commissioners sitting at their desks began, here and there to rise, to stand in solidarity. I could see all this emerging from the platform. Then an even more remarkable thing began to happen. People who had voted against them began to rise and stand in solidarity, and I thought, God bless this church of ours which is willing to debate and argue and fuss about this most difficult issue. And having made a decision then, even in the midst of that intensity to reach across the divide and try in some way to extend the compassion and love and caring of our Lord, Jesus Christ. If there is hope for our future, brothers and sisters, it is in the replication of that moment, that spirit of inclusivity and compassion.

I think there are a lot of reasons to be hopeful about this church. I think there are some things we need to be about. I think we need to reinvent our church in many places for the 21st Century. I think we need to learn how to start more new churches than we have for a long time. We've been losing members every since I was ordained in 1963; I hope those two facts aren't connected, but...

[laughter from congregation]

...as a matter of fact, we continue to lose members and about all I can see that we've done for thirty years about that membership hemorrhage is wring our hands and being good

Calvinists, try to figure out who did something wrong and blame them for it. Conservatives know who is at fault, it's the liberals. The liberals know who is at fault, it's the conservatives. The evangelicals know it's the social activists. The social activists think it's the conservative evangelicals. And I don't think it's anybody's fault. I think we haven't been quick enough to keep up with demographic change. Don Leiden, who is a wonderful sociologist over at Hope College in Michigan, has called to our attention to the fact that churches have always grown by reproducing themselves in larger numbers each generation. Our birthrate went under zero twenty-five years ago. As did the Methodists and Episcopalians and other mainline churches. Now, Sue and I have five children. We've done our evangelical best.

[laughter from congregation]

We need to start 140 churches a year. We simply need to figure out how to do that. And that means no longer people in Louisville or New York and Atlanta, it means the Presbyteries, folks like you and me, have to figure out how to start 140 churches. When we do that, this Presbyterian Church of ours will grow again. We need to get ourselves back aggressively on the campuses of this nation. We need to be in the very places where young people are asking the questions of meaning and life and the future. We need the gospel of Jesus Christ to be in the marketplace of ideas. And we need an every-home publication. We need to tell this family the good things about the Presbyterian story. The simple ~~and terrible~~ truth is that most of what Presbyterians know about their church is bad news because it comes from papers whose whole purpose is to tell bad news about the church. So we will have an every-home publication and I hope with the cooperation of the whole family we will figure out a way to

pay for and put into two million homes the story of what Presbyterians are about in this nation and the world.

What's ahead?

I think it all depends on how we conduct ourselves in these next two years. I believe that it's time to reach out to one another in that compassionate love of Jesus Christ, and perhaps to stop using labels for one another. Wouldn't it be something if in the midst of this dispute we could continue our reading through First Corinthians to Chapter 13 where Paul suggests a better way to be a church, a more excellent way, the way of Agape. Agape, which he defines beautifully as love that is patient, kindness, gentleness, love that does not insist on its own way. Can you imagine what a different place this church would be if we all became literalists about that single phrase. We will treat one another with a love that does not insist on its own way. You know I think if we did that, if we showed the world how to do that, how to transform ideological combat back into a love affair, if we showed the world how enemies become brothers and sisters, the world might find the Presbyterian Church interesting again, might in fact want to know the source of that power of love to convert and to change lives.

This is a very precious church and it's unity is one of the gifts that has been given to us. It's my profound honor every day this last year to put this cross around my neck, the Moderator's Cross. It's actually three crosses riveted together and I hope that if we have an opportunity to greet one another afterward you'll take close look, and I hope you'll even hold onto this cross a little bit. It's wonderful; the edges are wearing off now. It's like those wonderful marble stairways in the cathedrals of Europe where people have been up and down so many

times they're worn smooth. Well, these crosses are worn smooth by the loving touch of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Presbyterians. The idea for this cross and its symbolizing of the unity of the Presbyterian Church was Harrison Ray Anderson's. Anderson was one of my predecessors, the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church. He cared very much about the unity of the whole church of Jesus Christ, the ecumenical church, but particularly as Presbyterian Church, for a very personal reason. It was Harrison Ray Anderson's great-grandfather, in the year 1861, who at the meeting of the General Assembly leapt to his feet at that Assembly and in a moment of patriotic fervor made a motion that all Presbyterian ministers should sign a loyalty oath to the Union. Well, in 1861 there were some Presbyterian ministers and elders that didn't think that was a very good idea. So as the War Between the States loomed on the horizon, that motion had the effect of splitting the Presbyterian Church into a southern church and a northern church. Anderson bore that split personally and felt called by God to do everything he could in his ministry to reverse it, to heal it, to bring the two branches back together. He travelled extensively and tried to cultivate influence in north and south and persuade leaders to put the conflict behind and to get the church back together. One time he was on the Island of ^{Iona} ~~Jona~~ and I think he was inspired. He found these beautiful silver, Celtic crosses and bought two and brought them home and gave one to the Moderator of the southern church, a friend of his, and gave the other to the Moderator of the northern church, a friend of his, and said these crosses are for the day when the two churches will finally unite and the two crosses can be joined. Later, a third cross was purchased and given to the Moderator of the old United Presbyterian Church in North America. You know the story, I'm sure. In 1958, the first step toward Presbyterian reunion happened in Pittsburgh. Two denominations joined, two crosses joined. And in 1983, in Atlanta, 122 years after his great-grandfather made that motion and sadly, four years after he died, the two churches met

together. Two General Assemblies met side-by-side, passed overwhelmingly the Articles of Reunion and there was a great celebration as the Presbyterian family finally got together. The Service of Holy Communion was planned to celebrate the reunion and in the midst of that Service of Communion someone was inspired to invite a welder to join the liturgy. The three crosses were placed on the Communion table and the welder put the visor down and fired up the gun and in a clatter of noise and shower of sparks riveted these three crosses together. It was, brothers and sisters, a memorable, high and holy moment. There was not a dry eye in the 15,000 people who were present.

This church of ours is a precious legacy. I didn't do anything except receive it as a gift from my parents and my grandparents and the people in the church which handed on to me; the legacy of Presbyterianism. Its unity, I happen to believe, is something that God gives the church. It is the gift of the spirit and it is one which you and I are to treat lovingly and carefully and honestly and compassionately. So will you join me in the effort to hold this family together for another generation so that we can hand it on. And as we join in the sacrament of Communion this evening, may we remember how precious this tradition is and how important it is and how much it matters to the life of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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The word of the Lord.

[response from congregation]

Don't you just love those Corinthians? There weren't very many of them, maybe fifty, seventy-five. Perched in one of the most cosmopolitan seaport cities in the Roman Empire. Trade crossroads, merchants, tradespeople coming and going, there was a thriving marketplace in downtown Corinth. There was a theatre, a synagogue, there was a temple to Aphrodite right outside town that employed one thousand working sacred prostitutes. This was an interesting city. Here they were, perched in that precarious situation where the city virtually ignored them and when it paid any attention to them at all, as Paul indicates in the introduction to the letter, concluded that their ideas were foolishness. There they were and instead of, instead of sitting ^{down} together and doing a little strategic planning about how to survive in Corinth, instead of putting a mission plan in place about how to say a good word about Jesus Christ that had a chance of getting heard in that interesting cosmopolitan city, the Corinthian Christians decided instead to choose up sides and have a fight. How like a church.

And Paul, Paul was worried that that fight was so public and ~~I think so sincere~~ and so vehement that the little church would whirl apart. It was, in fact, a public scandal. "Is Christ divided?" he asked them, I think testily.

~~Now they were, they were~~ theologians in that church. They took their theology seriously, it was a serious theological dispute. Some said, "We belong to, ~~we belong to a~~ Apollos." Apollos was apparently a professor from Alexandria who had stopped in at Corinth and had his version of the Christian gospel and he collected some supporters and they believed this was the way. "We're the Apollos' party." And others said, "Well, we belong to Paul." Paul

would have been the liberal. Paul would allow anybody in the church, even the Gentiles. And others said, "Well, we belong to Peter." Peter was the Torah Christian. The one who began with the rule book. ~~The Book of Order~~. And, others said, "Well, you all may belong [notice the way after a year I've learned how to say y'all?]....

[laughter from congregation]

...you all might belong to Paul or Apollos or Cephas, but we belong to Jesus. We, we have the real thing." And to them ^{all} Paul writes, Is Christ divided? Be of one mind. Be in agreement.

^{Two} Several years ago at Wichita, at the event in which I first met Kathy Ulrich, we talked about re-imagining, and at the end of that assembly the Presbyterian Church said, "Theology matters." And it does matter. ~~And~~ last year we elected a Moderator who reminded the church that mission matters and mission does matter. And I'm suggesting this year that the church matters. And that in these precarious and interesting times in which God has called us to the Presbyterian Church, USA, it's about time to say that loudly and clearly because if we don't say it loudly and clearly and hold onto one another we may, in fact, find ourselves as divided, embarrassingly so as that group in Corinth.

These are interesting days, are they not, for the Presbyterian Church? We're a, ~~we're a~~ big church, ~~still~~. We have 2.7 million members. And while that's not as many as we wish we had, that's still a lot of Presbyterians. ~~And~~ we have 11,400 congregations all over this country. ~~Serving God with distinction. Serving the Kingdom of Jesus Christ with~~

commitment, ~~deep commitment~~ to justice and peace and love and compassion. We have 68 colleges and universities that are still related to our General Assembly. ~~And we have mission work in 87 different countries. And when we pull our funds and do our program together, we spend \$116 million per year, so we're a big operation. And we're an old church.~~

It's one of the joys of the Moderator of the General Assembly to be invited to preach at church anniversaries. ~~And so I've preached at a few 100s and a few 150s and a couple of 25s and 50s, but I've also preached at a few 200th anniversaries and a 250th and a 275th. And before the experience is over I'll be in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, preaching at the 300th anniversary of the Lawrenceville Church just down the road from Princeton. We have churches on the shores of the bay down there that are more than 320 years old. We've been here before the nation. Our predecessors, those crusty, stubborn Calvinists coming over here from Scotland and Northern Ireland brought with them a deep-seated suspicion of hierarchies and monarchies and authority and so they brought with them the philosophic seedbed of the American Revolution. So much so that William Pitt was said to have remarked famously one time on the floor of Parliament that he was known to have called the skirmish in the Colonies that "Presbyterian revolt."~~

And ~~then~~ when independence was won, those sons and daughters of John Calvin dove deeply into the life of the nation and helped to write what historian Martin Marty calls the singular, most Calvinist ~~document ever produced~~, public, Calvinist document ever produced - the Constitution of the United States of America. With its suspicion of one another, with its, ~~with its~~ realistic view of humankind, with its checks and balances and its continuing insistence on the dignity of the individual.

We're a big church and we're an old church and we are a distinguished missionary church. I've spent my life pretty much in and around cities and I've been concerned mostly about urban ministry. And so it's been a wonderful experience this year for me to have seen the global, ~~the~~ worldwide ministries of this Presbyterian Church of ours and to learn a lot of things I didn't know before. Namely, that we Presbyterians are ~~kind of~~ the premier missionary church in the United States. ~~That~~ our missionaries were there first, we were there first and with more resources than any other American denomination. So much so that all around the world now there are Christian communities flourishing because of Presbyterian mission. We are still related to 87 partner projects in 87 different countries. We still have more than 400 full-time mission personnel in the field and probably another 500 or 600 volunteers coming and going. It's ~~still~~ an impressive operation.

Much of that early mission work has borne amazing fruit. I was privileged to bring your greetings to the Presbyterian Reform Church in Cuba which finds itself suddenly free since 1990. Free to operate out in the open and suddenly its sanctuaries are full, it doesn't have enough ministers. Its seminary at ~~Matanzas~~ ^{Matanzas} is crowded with bright, energetic, committed young Cuban Christians.

~~And~~ I was privileged to go on down to Brazil and see one of the fastest growing Presbyterian Churches in the world. Collaborating in Brazil, interestingly enough, in theological education with the Pentecostals. What an interesting combination. ^{a Reform} Reform theological seminary helping the Pentecostals, the Pentecostals helping us.

And then to go to Central Europe. Where I didn't know much about the reform church and to bring your greetings to the ^{Waldensians} ~~Waldensians~~ in Rome and to the Vatican, by the way. Which is, indeed, interested in what's happening in this church of ours in the United States. And then to go on to Croatia and to bring greetings to Presbyterian partners in that tortured part of the world. We were visitors in ^{Osijek} ~~Oscjak~~, a large city, 100,000 people, where 800,000 mortar shells fell in a very short period of time. And where 1,000 people, ^{you killing} ~~not combatants now~~, we're talking about children and women and people just doing their grocery shopping and hanging up the wash, ~~were killed~~. And then on to ^{Vinkovci} ~~Vincossi~~, a small town where the Bishop of the Reformed Church of Croatia and his wife live. He's the pastor of the Reformed Church in ~~Vincossi~~. ~~Vincossi~~ is where a little bit of ethnic cleansing took place. You've heard the horror stories of one race simply killing other people because they're Muslims or because they're Catholics. But ethnic cleansing also does something very devious. One ^{side} ~~force~~ targets the heart of the culture of the other ^{side} ~~force~~ so the ^{than} ~~Serbians had~~ targeted the hospitals and the town hall and the schools and the symphony, where the symphony plays. And the churches, And there they all were in ruins. The Serbians bombed the Roman Catholic Cathedral in ~~Vincossi~~, and so the Roman Catholics went down the street and blew up the Serbian Orthodox Cathedral and our little ^{Reformed} ~~Reform~~ Church took a direct hit. And because of our partnership, ^{any} ~~because of~~ our generosity, a grant was made to repair that building and since the date ^{the peace} ~~accords~~ have ^{man} ~~been~~ signed, the people are back, and Bishop ^{Long} ~~Long~~ and his wife are back in place and the building is patched up and the organ plays again. And I was invited because I'm Moderator of the Church that made all this happen to receive the thanks, the gratitude of this modest little church on the Sunday after Easter. I was there to preach and to preside at Communion. What an experience to preach about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, about what that means historically and what that means in terms of existential hope in a city that was

flattened a couple of years ago and now where new life is beginning to happen. And what an experience to break the bread and serve the cup to a congregation of about 120 Croatian Presbyterians crowded in this little church, shoulder-to-shoulder. Standing, by the way, they stand for the entire ceremony of Communion and the pastor there gives the bread to each person. And to see the tears on the cheeks of the Croatians. Not only in gratitude, but I think gratitude for this larger fellowship of the church of which we are all a part.

And then Korea. Just three weeks ago today we were in Korea bringing greetings again to interesting and vital and important mission partners in Korea. There are a lot of Presbyterian Churches in Korea. There are big churches, 20,000, 30,000, 40,000 members. We called on our partners in Hannam University and Yon Se University and to girls schools and saw Presbyterian Christianity as vigorously and vitally alive as any place in the world. And then visited the 38th Parallel. I'm old enough to remember the events that happened in the Peninsula of Korea in the early 1950s and saw that harsh barbed wire demilitarized zone on the other side of which one of the finest and largest and most aggressive armed forces in the world, the North Korean Army, is perched waiting for the order to invade. Seoul, by the way, is just a 35 minute drive from the 38th Parallel, so we're talking about the immediacy of danger. Let me tell you that among the hopeful signs, and there aren't many, but among the hopeful signs in the Korean Peninsula is that on the north side of that harsh border, the 38th Parallel, in North Korea, the most closed society, a continuing Stalinist society in the world, there are still 500 Presbyterian Churches. All but two no longer have buildings. There are two operating in buildings, but there are 500 congregations meeting in homes, meeting secretly, waiting for the day of reunification. If there is hope, it's there. And let me tell you just one little vignette that touched my heart very deeply. We have a fine Presbyterian

our words in Korea
executive who is in charge of that. We divide the world into sections and we have a secretary
Insik Kim
for mission for each section. ~~En Sic Kim~~ is the secretary for that part of Asia and he is, in
fact, a North Korean, and because of our long and faithful witness we have the respect of the
North Korean government, as much respect as they're going to give any organization affiliated
with religion. *Insik* ~~En Sic Kim~~, *Permitted* because of this, is allowed to get into that *in Korea* country and can,
in fact, bring back first-hand reports and while there he told this touching story. There is an
artist, a very distinguished Korean artist by the name of Kim as well, who is now in his late
seventies. He left North Korea, left his wife and small child in 1950 because he was openly
a Christian and he would have been at that time executed so he went to the south and he has
not seen his family since 1950. Ten million Korean families, by the way, share that
experience of being divided. It would be as if this country were simply divided in half and
we had not seen anybody on the other side of the divide for half a century, well that's what
it is to live in Korea. Mr. Kim has not seen his wife or son since 1950. Somehow, our *Insik* ~~En~~
~~Sic Kim~~ and Mr. Kim the artist got together. *Insik* Mr. Kim the artist told our ~~En Sic Kim~~ this
story and said, if you're ever there in the village where I'm from and should happen to
remember, would you see if *if my wife is* she's alive? Would you just go find out and bring me news
back? Well *Insik* ~~En Sic Kim~~ did that. He found Mr. Kim's wife and said, your husband is a
distinguished artist in the south. She said, I know, I've heard that. She said, tell him I love
him. Tell him I think about him every day. And come back before you go back to South
Korea. So *Insik* our Kim, ~~En Sic Kim~~ came back and she gave him a jar of honey and said take
this honey to my husband and tell him I love him and think about him. So our *Insik* ~~En Sic Kim~~
did, *if the man* took it to the husband who could not believe the good news and in tears accepted the
honey. *Insik* Our ~~En Sic Kim~~ called on this gentlemen a year later and the little jar of honey was
still there. He ~~had been, he said~~ I eat it because I know she thinks of me everyday, I eat a
yes said

bite of ~~this~~ every day, but I've made it last for a year. Now that kind of faithfulness, that kind of love transcends politics, transcends military violence and because it is connected to the church and the cause of Jesus Christ I think there is reason in the midst of that dark, ^{situations} ~~dark~~ prospect for hopefulness.

This is a distinguished missionary church. Do you know that there are more Presbyterians in Kenya than there are in the United States? Do you know that the fastest growing Presbyterian ^{Reformed church} reform body in the world is in the Sudan where suffering is off the charts but yet the gospel of Christ is welcomed and churches are growing?

Well, once a year we Presbyterians in this country ~~pause in our skirmishing~~ and we go have a national meeting called a General Assembly. Now, if you've been you know that that General Assembly is part religious parliament, it's also part family reunion. I don't know about you, but my family gets together for a reunion once a year and I go to it, oh, maybe once every five years and it doesn't take long at a family reunion, I've discovered to realize why we only do this once a year.

[laughter from congregation]

Families may be better in the abstract than they are, as soon as you get together with your big family you realize that ~~hey~~, this is a diverse group. We don't have a whole lot in common except our genes.

Well, the Presbyterian Church gets together once a year and because all those commissioners are Calvinists, because they've felt the personal call of God to have an opinion about everything...

[laughter from congregation]

... and because they are seriously convinced that we are ~~called to bring to bear our~~, we're not closeted, cloistered Christians. ^{and that our faith exists in} We believe that it gets joined in the marketplace, our faith and life. ^{so} And ~~because all that is mixed up~~, the General Assembly can be an interesting week. ^{every} I was delighted to read something that old Charles Finney wrote in the last century, 1835. Finney was a great revivalist and he was apparently worrying about the Presbyterian Church because he wrote in a book on revivals and religion in 1835 the following: "These things in the Presbyterian Church, their contentions and janglings are so outrageous, so wicked, so ridiculous, that there must be a jubilee in Hell every year about the time of the meeting of the General Assembly."

[laughter from congregation]

Well, I don't know about a "jubilee in Hell" but because we are worldly Christians, we do reflect sometimes all together too accurately what's going on in the world. And ^I I propose to ~~you~~ tonight that we are currently reflecting ^{the} too accurately something that sociologists call a cultural war. Cultural war is when ideology overtakes us. Cultural war is when the civil exchange of opinions becomes the verbal equivalent of hand-to-hand combat. It's a situation in which you can't compromise any more because you might betray your truths. It's where

the moderate middle all of a sudden sounds like the waffling place to be. Well, there's an awful lot of that going on right now in the Presbyterian Church. The Assembly did manage to stay together this last year. We, as you know, decided to send to the Presbyteries of our church a proposal to amend the Constitution and the Presbyteries have now voted on that amendment and it has passed. When I was moderating through those intense discussions, I knew that there would come a time along about March, 1997, when a Presbytery would cast its ballots and this issue would be adjudicated one way or the other, when you really didn't know which way it would go. Smart money in the family at that point was betting that Amendment B would lose. Originally everybody kind of thought it would lose but indeed it won. And I knew then that at some point in the spring there was going to be a sizeable portion of the Presbyterian family deeply, deeply disappointed, perhaps very angry. Before I knew how it would come out I was saying, in every speech I could make, that I hoped we could find a way to somehow affirm the diversity which exists in this beautiful church of ours, to hold onto one another and to respect the fact that we do not agree on this issue, that we are as deeply divided and all most evenly divided in terms of the actual percentage of Commissioners who voted on this issue as you can get. The vote is about 51 to 49 in terms of the percent in terms of the actual Commissioner vote. So I'm calling on our whole family now in these critical days to extend what Cliff Kirkpatrick, our new Stated Clerk calls an extra measure of grace. We've been promised by advocates of Amendment B that there will be no witch hunt and I hope that's a good promise and I'm calling also equally on the other side, the people who are vehemently opposed to Amendment B, to not walk away from this. To not declare absolute independence but for all of us, for Christ' sake, literally, to take a big, deep breath and to stand down and to step back and take the measure of what we've done. After the vote there was a, I thought, a pure Presbyterian moment. The Moderator had met

Resume here

with people on both sides of the issue and had decided that whoever won or whoever lost this vote would have an opportunity to express themselves to the Assembly so when the vote was taken and Amendment B was passed, the gay-lesbian organization ^{were} was granted ten minutes on the docket to do with it what they wished. They could speak, but they decided instead to simply, quietly, with great dignity to walk into the Assembly singing a South African anthem, ^{walking} *Marching in the Light of God*. And so in they came and there were 900 people before it was all over. Gay Presbyterians, lesbian Presbyterians. But probably the majority ~~were not~~. ~~Probably the majority~~ were their parents and their brothers and sisters and their heterosexual friends and their general supporters and they walked in very quietly and some were wearing white stoles, memorializing Presbyterian gay-lesbian persons who had died of AIDS. A remarkable thing began to happen. The Commissioners sitting at their desks began here and there to rise, to stand in solidarity. I could see all this emerging from the platform. And, ~~then~~ an even more remarkable thing began to happen. People who had voted against them began to rise and stand in solidarity and I thought, God bless this church of ours which is willing to debate and argue and fuss about this most difficult issue. And having made a decision then, even in the midst of that intensity to reach across the divide and try in some way to extend the compassion and love and caring of our Lord, Jesus Christ. If there is hope for our future, brothers and sisters, it is in the replication of that moment, that spirit of inclusivity and compassion.

I think there are a lot of reasons to be hopeful about this church. I think there are some things we need to be about. I think we need to reinvent our church in many places for the 21st Century. I think we need to learn how to start more new churches than we have for a long time. We've been losing members every since I was ordained in 1963; I hope those two

facts aren't connected, but...

[laughter from congregation]

...as a matter of fact, we continue to lose members and about all I can see that we've done for thirty years about that membership hemorrhage is wring our hands and being good Calvinists, try to figure out who did something wrong and blame them for it. Conservatives know who is at fault, it's the liberals. The liberals know who is at fault, it's the conservatives. The evangelicals know it's the social activists. The social activists think it's the conservative evangelicals. And I don't think it's anybody's fault. I think we haven't been quick enough to keep up with demographic change. ^{Leiden} ~~Don Leiden~~, who is a wonderful sociologist over at Hope College in Michigan, has called to our attention and asks ~~for our~~ ~~serious attention to~~ the fact that churches have always grown by reproducing themselves in larger numbers each generation. Our birthrate went under zero twenty-five years ago. As did the Methodists and Episcopalians and other mainline churches. Now, Sue and I have five children. We've done our evangelical best.

[laughter from congregation]

We need to start 140 churches a year. We simply need to figure out how to do that. And that means no longer people in Louisville or New York and Atlanta, it means the Presbyteries, folks like you and me, have to figure out how to start 140 churches. And when we do that, this Presbyterian Church of ours will grow again. We need to get ourselves back aggressively on the campuses of this nation. We need to be in the very places where young people are

asking the questions of meaning and life and the future. We need the gospel of Jesus Christ to be in the marketplace of ideas. ^{And} We need an every-home publication. We need to tell this family the good things about the Presbyterian story. The simple and terrible truth is that most of what Presbyterians know about their church is bad news because it comes from papers whose whole purpose is to tell bad news about the church. So we will have an every-home publication and I hope with the cooperation of the whole family we will figure out a way to pay for and put into two million homes the story of what Presbyterians are about in this nation and the world.

~~Well,~~ what's ahead, I think it all depends on how we conduct ourselves in these next two years. I ~~do~~ believe that it's time to reach out to one another in that compassionate love of Jesus Christ, perhaps to stop using labels for one another. Wouldn't it be something if in the midst of this dispute we could continue our reading through First Corinthians ^{to} ~~and fall into~~ Chapter 13 where Paul suggests a better way to be a church, a more excellent way, the way of Agape. Agape, which he defines beautifully as love that is patient, kindness, gentleness, love that does not insist on its own way. Can you imagine what a different place this church would be if we all became literalists about that single phrase. We will treat one another with a love that does not insist on its own way. You know I think if we did that, if we showed the world how to do that, how to transform ideological combat back into a love affair, if we showed the world how enemies become brothers and sisters, the world might find the Presbyterian Church interesting again. ^{Might} ~~Might~~ in fact want to know the source of that power of love to convert and to change lives.

This is a very precious church and it's unity ~~to me~~ is one of the gifts that has been given to us by our past. It's my profound honor every day this last year to, ~~one of the first things I do in the morning is to~~ put this cross around my neck, ~~it's~~ the Moderator's Cross. It's actually three crosses riveted together and I ~~do~~ hope that if we have an opportunity to greet one another afterward you'll take close look, and I hope you'll even hold onto this cross a little bit. It's wonderful, the edges are wearing off now. It's like those wonderful marble stairways in the cathedrals of Europe where people have been up and down ~~them~~ so many times they're worn smooth. Well, these crosses are worn smooth by the loving touch of thousands, hundreds of thousands of Presbyterians. The idea for this cross and its symbolizing of the unity of the Presbyterian Church was Harrison Ray Anderson's. Anderson was one of my predecessors. ~~In fact,~~ the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church. ~~And he~~ cared very much about the unity of the whole church of Jesus Christ, the ecumenical church, but particularly as Presbyterian Church for a very personal reason. It was Harrison Ray Anderson's great-grandfather in the year 1861, who at the meeting of the General Assembly, ~~old Reverend Anderson was~~ pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, and he leapt to his feet at that Assembly in a moment of patriotic fervor ~~and~~ made a motion that all Presbyterian ministers should sign a loyalty oath to the Union. Well, in 1861 there were some Presbyterian ministers and elders that didn't think that was a very good idea. So as the War Between the States loomed on the horizon, that motion ~~passing~~ had the effect of splitting the Presbyterian Church into a southern church and a northern church. Anderson bore that split personally and felt called by God to do everything he could in his ministry to reverse it, to heal it, to bring the two branches back together, ~~and so~~ he travelled extensively and tried to cultivate influence in north and south and persuade leaders to put ~~that~~ conflict behind and for ~~crying out loud~~ to get the church back together. One time in ~~Europe~~ he was on the Island of Iona and I think

he was inspired. He found these beautiful silver, Celtic crosses and bought two and brought them home and gave one to the Moderator of the southern church, a friend of his, and gave the other to the Moderator of the northern church, a friend of his, and said these crosses are for the day when the two churches will finally unite and the two crosses can be joined. Later, a third cross was purchased and given to the Moderator of the old United Presbyterian Church in North America. You know the story, I'm sure. In 1958, the first step toward Presbyterian reunion happened in Pittsburgh. Two denominations joined, two crosses joined. And then ~~it~~ ⁱⁿ was 1983, in Atlanta. ~~Finally~~, 122 years after his great-grandfather made that motion and sadly, four years after he died, ~~that~~ the two churches met together, in ~~Atlanta~~. Two General Assemblies met side-by-side, passed overwhelmingly the Articles of Reunion and there was a great celebration as the Presbyterian family finally got together. The Service of Holy Communion was ~~designated as the time to celebrate~~ ^{planned} ~~our~~ ^{the} reunion and in the midst of that Service of Communion someone was inspired. ~~They~~ ^{so} invited a welder to join the liturgy, ~~and~~ ^{to} ~~put~~ ^{we placed} the three crosses ~~right~~ on the Communion table and ~~brought~~ the welder ~~out~~ and he put the visor down and fired up the gun and ~~then~~ ⁱⁿ a clatter of noise and shower of sparks riveted these three crosses together. It was, brothers and sisters, a memorable, high and holy moment. There was not a dry eye ~~of~~ ^{in the} 15,000 people were present ~~and there wasn't a dry eye~~ ^{we} in the house.

This church of ours is a precious legacy. I didn't do anything except receive it as a gift from my parents and my grandparents and the people in the church which handed on to me the legacy of Presbyterianism. Its unity, I happen to believe, is something that God gives the church. It is the gift of the spirit and it is one ~~with~~ ^{the} which you and I are to treat lovingly and carefully and honestly and compassionately. So will you join me in ~~that~~ ^{the} effort to hold this

family together for another generation so that we can hand it on. And as we join in the sacrament of Communion this evening, may we remember how precious this tradition is and how important it is and how much it matters to the life of the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.